This sermon was supposed to start differently. It was supposed to start with an interview of a remarkable person. No - this remarkable person is not the CEO of a company, or a popular TED presenter, or a famous artist.

Instead, Mary Lucas worked as a hospice nurse. She always loved helping people. They called her an angel. She worked up until she couldn’t walk any more, due to her progressing Multiple Sclerosis (MS). By then she already faced her share of challenges and misfortunes. Her younger daughter died at age two from cystic fibrosis. Her son died at age nineteen from bone cancer.

In addition, she had to take care of her younger brother, who had Cri-du-chat, a disorder that is characterized by intellectual disability and delayed development.

She also took care of her daughter’s ex-husband who had cancer and eventually died from it.

Most recently, Mary became legally blind. She lost 95% of her vision and can only see shadows.

When I talked with her on the telephone about the possibility of interviewing her on Yom Kippur, I was blown away by how happy and upbeat she sounded.

In the first few minutes of our conversation, she made sure to tell me how fortunate she considers herself.

That’s right, you heard me correctly - she said that there are so many things in life that she appreciates: her wonderful husband, her adopted grandchildren, her devoted retired seeing eye dog. She emphasized that she has so many blessings in life. She shared with me that since she became blind, she has a better appreciation of various sounds. “It’s like a whole new dimension,” she said.

Mary spends most of her day talking to people. Many people call her to ask for advice, to receive support in a challenging life situation, or to share a bad diagnosis.

But most of all, people reach out to Mary when they need an injection of her unwavering joy of life, the undefeatable happiness that comes across when anyone interacts with her.

I have experienced the power of her positivity first hand. Long after I hung up from our conversation, I realized I was still smiling. Suddenly, my *tzures* - my troubles - seemed insignificant.

Unfortunately, Mary was not able to join us today because she had to put down her beloved dog who developed hepatitis.

Mary’s life story is one that has resonated throughout all of history. In the Book of Writings there is a powerful story about Job. You have all heard of Job. He is a wealthy person with a large family and happy life. He is steadfast in his faith to God. But Satan challenges God to test Job’s faith. God takes up the challenge and takes away Job’s wealth, the material comfort he enjoys, and worst of all, his children. God afflicts Job with a skin disease - covering his whole body with boils. Seeing her husband sitting in the dust, scraping his sores silently, his wife bursts out: “Do you still persist in your integrity? Just curse God and die!” To which Job replies, “If we accept good from God, shall we also not accept the evil?”

After speaking with Mary I realized she reminds me of Job. Throughout our conversation, I kept wondering where she draws her strength from. Not only does she move on each time life throws punches at her, but she manages to maintain an incredible positive attitude toward life.

For the answer I turned back to the book I have reread many times. It is called “Man’s Search for Meaning” by Viktor Frankl. A Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl describes atrocities he witnessed in the concentration camps. Through his stories, we witness the power of the human spirit and refusal to give in and give up. Prior to the war and after its end, Viktor Frankl was a psychologist who was trying to find a purpose even in the most terrible situations. He wanted to understand what it is that helps some people survive the most challenging trials.

He tells a story of a man who “lost faith in the future.” But the moment he did, he had no future. One evening after he voiced his lack of faith, he went to sleep and never woke up.

On the other hand, Frankl also observed that the prisoners who had more will to survive were the ones who had found meaning in their lives. Frankl argues that we have the ability to choose our own attitude and our own survival. He writes, “We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts, comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

Friends, here, in our Holocaust museum at Temple Shalom, we have preserved the testimonies of the children and relatives of survivors. These testimonies have one thing in common - the people who lived to share them embraced the attitude to choose their own way to deal with their situation.

Similarly, Dr. Edith Eva Eger, the author of the book, “The Choice,” is a concentration camp survivor who became a psychologist. She used her personal experiences to help patients facing various problems ranging from drug addiction, depression, and challenging divorces to anorexia or terminal illness, enabling them to find the courage and will to change their attitudes toward their situations and help them take charge of their lives.

It is easy for us all to feel that we are victims of fate when we face tough circumstances such as the loss of a loved one, a difficult childhood, a debilitating illness, tough times within our families or an unreasonable boss. In these situations we feel as if we are a victim to the fate we face. But the second we succumb to feeling like a victim, we give up on the possibility of changing our attitude. We give up on taking charge of our situation and we may fall deeper into despair.

When thinking of the concept of being a victim or being in control, I vividly remember a former congregant who was wheelchair bound. She had limbs amputated due to a case of bacterial meningitis that she had contracted years before I met her. Fran, z”l, had a whole list of medical issues and her life was obviously not a “picnic.” Yet, every time I think of her, I remember her radiant smile. She was never angry or upset; she never complained.

I especially remember well how she would reach out with the one finger that was left on her hand to touch the Torah and the glow on her face after she did so. She refused to be confined to the house. At some point, she worked. And do you know what she did? She was a greeter at Walmart, welcoming customers so that their shopping experience would be pleasant!

Last year, as I was thinking about the possible topics for this year’s sermons, I came across the book, “Life Is In Transitions,” by Bruce Feiler. Basically, the whole book is a collection of stories of people who had reached what they thought was the lowest point of their lives. Yet they were somehow able to turn their lives around and find a new meaning and appreciation for their situations.

One of the stories in the book was about an orthodox girl who grew up with an abusive father. Her mother finally left her husband and raised their six children on her own. The family was very poor and so when Fraidy reached eighteen years old, she didn’t have much of a choice in the marriage pool. She ended up marrying “her father.” In other words, she was matched with an abusive man and as a result she constantly lived in fear for her life.

Finally she gathered the courage to file for a divorce. After taking charge of her life, she applied for and was accepted at Rutgers University where she graduated with a 4.0 average. Upon completing her studies she secured a job as a reporter at the Asbury Park Press. She bought her own home and a few years later she launched an organization to help women escape from arranged (forced) marriages.

When interviewed by the author, she said:” My life was in danger...but everything that came after was voluntarily - going to school, leaving the religion, becoming an advocate for other women. I took an involuntary situation and turned it into a voluntary one.” In other words, the second Fraidy stopped considering herself a victim, she was able to make significant changes in her life.

Of course, we can not expect to immediately bounce back from the curves life throws at us. There has to be a period of mourning, a period of adjustment, a period of coming to terms with the new situation we find ourselves in. But then it is up to us to determine whether we can make a transition and say *hineni* - here I am. Can we take the necessary steps to “find meaning after a major life disruption?”

But of course before we achieve a physical transition, we need to make the transition in our mind from being broken to being whole.

The word for brokenness in Hebrew is *shevirah*. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgenstern, the Kotsker Rebbe, said, “There is nothing more complete than a broken heart.” How is that possible? Think about it! When something breaks into pieces, there are cracks that create gaps in between. Based on this saying, true growth takes place in the cracks, between the broken shards. In other words, our maturity, our wisdom, our physical strength and our spiritual fortitude is derived from the times we have felt broken but have found the courage to overcome the challenges.

Shever (brokenness) is also the source of the word mashber -- which means both crisis -- something is broken -- and birthing stool -- where in the ancient near east upon which women would crouch to give birth. Out of brokenness there can be crisis - and birth - even and especially if there are birth pangs and birth pains.

*Shevarim* -- the broken blasts of the shofa which we sound on Rosh Hashanah, also comes from the word *shever*.

This sound always reminds me of a cry. It does not require too deep of a breath.

But the series of blasts we sound always culminate with *tekiyah gedolah* - the long blast.

Before *tekiyah gedolah*, on the other hand, we need to fill our lungs with as much air as possible in order to sound the shofar as long and strong as we can.

When we are broken, we cry. And then we take a deep breath and we face the new reality with renewed strength and courage.

As we stand today before God, on the Holiest of Holy Days, we do not ask God to grant us a perfect life, because that cannot be. Instead we ask God to give us the strength to face our challenges head on. We pray to be able to take a deep breath and say

**HINEINI**